Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Republican Advice: Presidential Penance

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Dooming the melancholy private dialogue between President Nixon's lieutenants and congressional Republicans is total White House rejection of Capitol Hill's deeply felt need for public penance by the President. See Sp. 11/7

Current negotiations ostensibly concern how much Mr. Nixon shall open his files to save his presidency. But these talks founder over unstated congressional demands that Mr. Nixon somehow confront Congress, perhaps as a committee witness, with a show of expiation and contrition. One influential (and pro-Nixon) Republican senator feels Mr. Nixon cannot survive unless like Henry II, the 12th century King of England who atoned for the murder of St. Thomas A. Becket by being publicly scourged, he makes public penance.

That is anathema to the President and all his advisers. Indeed, he is ignoring advice from his own staff to make considerably less humiliating gestures. Thus, whatever agreements are reached between Republican leaders and the White House over disclosure of tape recordings and documents, the basic gap will remain unbridged and Republican sentiment for Mr. Nixon's resignation will rise.

The White House's understanding of sentiment on Capitol Hill is even murkier today than in calmer times. Mr. Nixon's aides interpreted conservative Sen. Peter Dominick's criticism of the President Monday as reflecting fear about his 1974 re-election campaign in Colorado. In truth, Dominick was saying in public what almost all his colleagues say privately in the Republican cloakroom.

Republican senators who still have not uttered a single word critical of Mr. Nixon say privately he must resign once Rep. Gerald Ford is confirmed as Vice President. The barrage of recommendations from Capitol Hill are eleventh-hour efforts to avoid the necessity of the President's resignation.

Sen. William Brock of Tennessee, a conservative and a Nixon loyalist, recently wrote the President a remarkable letter outlining the steps necessary to save himself — stressing public disclosure not only of tape recordings but of *all* presidential documents bearing on Watergate. Less sweeping requests are now being negotiated with the White House by Senate Republican leaders.

But tapes and documents will not truly satisfy Congress. Many Republicans feel the President should face interrogation from his legislative peers — perhaps by the Senate Watergate committee. One Republican leader in Congress, in public a total supporter of Mr. Nixon, is privately telling the White House the President must testify because he is "at the end of the road" and no other course remains.

The avowed purpose of calling Mr. Nixon to testify: to probe inconsistencies in Mr. Nixon's confusing explanations of Watergate. Beyond the avowed purpose, however, is the Henry II syndrome: the feeling Mr. Nixon can survive only by humbling himself. It is here where all hopes sink of agreement between the President and congressional Republicans.

"If the President has to go up to the Hill, groveling, on his hands and knees, I'd rather see him impeached," one senior Nixon aide told us. A middle-level assistant put it this way: "Are we going to go out crawling on our bellies or are we going to go out swinging?"

Those two presidential assistants are soft-liners in the White House context. Naturally, then, the hard-liners—headed by Richard M. Nixon—are unalterably opposed to any act of penance. Indeed, the President ignores considerably more moderate gestures recommended by his own staff.

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